DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 832 SO 005 887

AUTHOR	Rabinowitz, Richard
TITLE	Learning in Public Places: The Museum.
PUB DATE	26 Feb 73
NOTE	31p.; Presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 26, 1973
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Cultural Centers; Educational Resources; *Exhibits; Expositions; *Learning; *Museums; Resource Centers; Speeches
IDENTIFIERS	*American Educational Research Association

ABSTRACT

In this speech, the author traces the history of museums as educational environments by speculating on how history museums have presented themselves to the public through their exhibits. The author also provides an outline of the implications that these methods of presentation have had on visitors. A major objective is to determine how history museums actually alter the basic relationship between the object and its beholder. Museum display development has been affected by at least five factors -- the taxonomic system used to organize the exhibit, the contribution of amateurs and specialists, the epistemological assumptions at work, the particular historiographical biases favored by each format, and the unresolved questions generated by each mode in the minds of visitors. Earliest history museums emphasized perception rather than reflection, offering exhibits which were collections of oddities and eccentricities, while later museums organized their holdings within some taxonomic system. The resulting effect was an exhibit which focused upon visual aspects as represented by the period space displays of "room" museums, house museums; or re-creations of entire village communities. These museums displays typically suggest an air of social harmony, ignoring the historical epoch and concept of historical change. A suggested solution is to have the visitor directly experience relationships through simulation. (Author/SJM)

ED 077832

SP 005 887

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

LEARNING IN PUBLIC PLACES: THE MUSEUM

Richard Rabinowitz, Director for Museum Education,
Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, Massachusetts

Delivered at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association,
New Orleans, Louisiana, February 26, 1973

There are probably more than 7,000 institutions which might be called museums in the United States; their annual attendance is estimated at over 300 million visitors, far higher than the totals for major league baseball, football, basketball and hockey combined.[1] Museums are not only public places, they are popular. But if they are public, the experience of them is curiously private, and it is difficult to assess what is happening to those multitudes in our galleries. One can turn for answers to literary accounts of museum-going; the most elegant, surely, of this season is John Updike's:

> What we seek in museums is the opposite of what we seek in churches--the consoling sense of previous visitation. In museums, rather, we seek the untouched, the never-before-discovered; and it is their final unsearchability that leads us to hope, and return.[2]

That may be right, but it can hardly be representative. Do our visitors see museums as realms of explorations, even explorations of the mysteries of womanhood, as Updike does? My favorite account of a museum visit is less sensuous, if more disconcerting. It is from Finnegans Wake:

> This the way to the museyroom. Mind your hats goan in! Now yiz are in the Willingdone Museyroom. This is a Prooshious gunn.

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

> This is a ffrinch. Tip. This is the flag of the Prooshious, the Cap and Soracer. This is the bullet the byng the flag of the Prooshious. This is the ffrinch that fire on the Bull that bang the flag of the Prooshious. Saloos the Crossgunn! Up with your pike and fork! Tip. (Bullsfoot! Fine!) This is the triplewon hat of Lipoleum. Tip. Lipoleumhat.[3]

And so on. We have heard it all before. The putative self-dramatization of being in the presence of the surviving artifacts of momentous events, the physical discomfort of twisting and turning to see everything, the endless use of the demonstrative phrase, and above all, the precious gibberish that surrounds the attribution of names to alien objects.

Somewhere between Joyce's and Updike's accounts, but including both, there is something called museum education. How can we study it, or trace its history? As places of learning, museums are paradoxical. On the one hand, they do not require entrance examinations and they offer no certification of one's success or failure. On the other hand, their possessiveness about museum objects creates an endless series of coercions for the visitor--don't touch, move along, no smoking, no eating or even talking in the galleries. Freely admitted, the visitor is free to do very little.

There are many other cultural and recreational agencies which might be accounted as affording educational experiences to their clientele. But unlike theaters, cinemas or sports arenas, museums are presumed in law to have this responsibility. Even the most valuable of our collections, though it achieves front-page status in The New York Times chiefly for accessions and

"deaccessions," was established primarily for its instructional values.[4] The literature of the history of museums is rich in similar pronouncements of their obligation to educate the public, and in repeated jeremiads and calls for new directions in museum education from successive presidents of groups like the American Association of Museums.

I trust that we may safely ignore such statements, as most museums do, in studying the history of museums as educational environments. Nor do I think it advisable to rely upon analyses of museum education, for there are few of them that rise above the level of an impressionistic, slightly flirtatious glance.[5] Instead, I would like to speculate a bit on how museums have presented themselves to the public through their exhibits, and provide a schematic outline of the implications that these methods of presentation have had for visitors. I will focus on history museums for several reasons. First, because art museums have found little occasion to alter the basic relationship between the object and its beholder. Second, because science and natural history museums correspond closely in content areas to the subject of Helen Horowitz's paper on zoos, and because their technical development is analogous to that of history museums. Third, because I know history museums best. And fourth, because this is an audience primarily of historians.

Let me emphasize from the start that I do not see the succession of presentative formats I will describe as an ineffable progression toward a perfect museum environment. At Old Sturbridge Village, all such formats--cabinets of curiosities, formal and interpretive exhibits, period rooms, historic houses, a village museum, interpretive demonstrations, and opportunities for historical

simulation--coexist, if somewhat uneasily, in the minds of both the staff and the visitors. This makes definitions of historical linkages quite difficult, but I will at least try to discuss each in the order of its initial emergence. I want to ask what changes have taken place in these methods of presentation since the first American museum opened 200 years ago in Charleston, South Carolina. And I want to discuss how the educational experience of each has been affected by at least five factors--the taxonomic system used to organize the exhibit, the contribution of amateurs and specialists, the epistemological assumptions at work, the particular historiographical biases favored by each format, and the unresolved questions generated by each mode in the minds of visitors. I hope that all of this can help us discern how museums have reflected and influenced the extraordinary American interest in its past.

Our first historical museums were, as is well known, "cabinets of curiosities," collections of oddities linked only by their unrelatedness to each other. It is well to regard such museums as the basic American type, for they existed without standards for accession and without much interpretive intent. There were, in the years before the Civil War, two distinct types of such museums. On the one hand, cabinets were almost automatically assumed to be significant additions to the emerging learned societies of the day. Organizations like the American Antiquarian Society, the New-York Historical Society and the American Philosophical Society accepted specimens of geological and archaeological wonderment as possible sources for scholarship. And the membership of these elite agencies, for and by whom they had been established, did produce a significant amount of scholarship, as well as laying the groundwork for their superb present

collections of written documents.[6] The objects collected were intentionally oddities, offering comments on the Creator's gigantic capacity for diversity among natural and human specimens. Explicitly beyond the Linnaean classification or Western European historical experience, these artifacts of non-European and pre-Columbian America offered a majestic and ancient past to the membership. Among the Indian collections, for example, of the American Philosophical Society received in 1797 were the following:

A pair of Indian boy's leggings from the Missouri.

A Calumet of Peace, ornamented with Porcupine's quills for Indians on the Missouri.

An Indian Conjuror's Mask, formed of the scalp, &c. of a Buffalo, from the Missouri.

An Arrow neatly headed with bone, from the Saukis Indians on the upper parts of the Mississippi.

Eight of the Arrows commonly used by the Miami and neighbouring Indians.

A Stone Pestle used by the Indians formerly, for pounding corn and jerking flesh.

A Stone Hatchet formerly in use among the Savages.

A Specimen of petrified supposed Buffalo dung, from the Rapids of the Ohio.

Fine fossil coal, from Cincinnati, on the Ohio.

Part of one among thirty or forty trees, all completely petrified, from 212 miles up the Tenessee river.

An Indian bowl, taken out of the bed of the Tenessee.

An Oviform stone, from the Wabash.

Marine Shells and perforated bones, taken out of an ancient Indian grave on the Great Kanahwa.

American Porcupine Quills dyed with different colours.

Quills of the same animal with their natural colour.

Skin of an Indian taken from the side.

Part of the Sea-Otter skin, from its flank, where the fur is shortest, being part of a blanket coat brought from the Pacific Coast by Dr. M'Kenzie, in 1794.

An American Swan's foot stuffed.

A Spear used by the Savages in killing Col. Chew, on the Ohio.

Various Indian Arrows from the North Western territory.

Specimen of Indian Sculpture in wood, resembling the Beaver; from the Kaskaskian nation.

A pair of Indian garters tipped with tin and Porcupine quills, from the Wabash.

Another pair from the Creek nation.

An Indian belt, from the Mississippi.[7]

[Slide of the Exhuming the Mastodon, C. W. Peale, 1806]

There were objects, largely those of common, if freakish, origin, which were unacceptable. Christopher Columbus Baldwin, the librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, who was to perish in search of survivals of the culture of Ohio Mound-Builders, indicated his repugnance at such an assortment:

> There were very few objects of curiosity or antiquity in the collection. This is correct taste. A library should contain nothing but books, coins, statuary and pictures. I admit now and then that an antiquity should be admitted. But how absurd to pile up old bureaus and chests, and stuff them with old coats and hats and high-heeled shoes. The true history of all these things are handed down by painting. And besides, if they are once received there will be attempts making to fool somebody with the 'Shield of Achilles.' ...I have discouraged the sending them to the Antiquarian Hall for this reason.[8]

There was a place for such stuff, of course, in the popular version of these early museums. More properly seen as the domain of a growing urban population, places like Barnum's in New York or the Boston Museum were weird assemblages not of the historically or culturally distant but of the contemporaneously eccentric. A broadside of the Boston Museum from 1857 advertises that it was "open day and evening, [offering] dramatic performances [this one was J. T. Trowbridge's pro-abolition play, Neighbor Jackwood] every evening and Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, tragedies, comedies, farces, & brilliant spectacles, [and] containing half a million curiosities, birds, quadrupeds, fishes, reptiles, insects, statuary, paintings, engravings, coins & medals." The performance was said to begin with the Overture by Kalliwoda, then the play, then a dance called "Nationalities" by Miss A. Raymond, "to conclude with the laughable Farce, The Fire Eater." On Saturday evening, it is said, "Miss Kimberly will give her last Recitation of Hiawatha." The whole could be had for twenty-five cents, although orchestra and

reserved seats went for twice that, or about half a laborer's wages for a day's work.[9]

[Slide of Boston Museum, S. W. Lander, Spectacles for Young Eyes, 1863.]

[Slide of the Gulliver in Lilliput exhibit at the Boston Museum.]

[Slide of Fejee Mermaid, Boston Museum. From Lander, Spectacles, 1863.]

So broad a cultural experience was augmented in Cincinnati's Western Museum by "The Infernal Regions," an elaborate confabulation of wax figures and mechanical devices, and the most successful museum exhibit in the nation before the Civil War.[10] It offered a chance to foretaste the horrors of the nether regions to local citizens and visitors to the metropolis who were unsatisfied by the milder satanic terrors preached by Lyman Beecher and other local clergymen.

If there was a pedagogical theory which underlay this assortment of eccentricities, it might have come from the insistence of the prevalent philosophy of the mind upon the superiority of presentative knowledge--that is, direct perception rather than reflection--and upon the value of the "vividness of the impression" in fixing ideas in the mind. Still, critics like Samuel Foster Haven, who succeeded Baldwin at the American Antiquarian Society, rejoined that their organizations were "intended for scientific use and gratification of enlightened curiosity," and should not be "a mere museum of articles for idle unprofitable inspection."[11] The tension between encouraging "enlightened curiosity" and maintaining the freedom of the visitor to engage in "idle inspection" has been a continuing dilemma for museums since the mid-nineteenth century. The more scholarship used to label objects in the collection, the more attention is diverted from the objects themselves, and the more singular each object becomes. As long as singularity is itself one's

object, as it frequently remains for the art museum's objets, this is not too serious. But the power of the museum to present simultaneous impressions of distinct artifacts easily results in a contradictory condition. Objects, like the paintings in this nineteenth-century gallery, simply interfere with each other.

[Slide of Interior of the Peale Museum, Titian Peale.]

The response of museums, from the later nineteenth century to today, is to organize their holdings within some taxonomic system. In practice, this has meant the distribution of the collections into types of artifacts--arrowheads here, quilts there, clocks in that gallery, typewriters in this one. This often follows the decisions of collectors to focus on one sort of object, as in this painting of a collector of old china from the Shelburne Museum in Vermont.

[Slide of A Lover of Old China, by Edward Lamson Henry, 1889, Webb Art Gallery, Shelburne Museum.]

[Slide of Estate of Alvin Adams, Watertown, Mass.]

One casualty of the transformation of cabinets of curiosities into arrangements of what I will call "formal exhibits" was the emphasis on oddity itself. Instead, exhibits like these were organized around finer discriminations among artifacts of similar classification, most generally around discriminations based on chronology. Dating or attributing regional origin to artifacts could no longer be accomplished by the membership elite of museums; the skills of professional curators were needed by museums, as those of bibliographers were by libraries in the same era. Such professionals emerged from the ranks of archaeologists, historians and art historians, but their primary responsibility for the classification of objects soon gave rise to a new influence upon the museum as an educational

system. For one thing, curators have always played the role of weeding out the irrelevant and poor pieces; in their desire to find pieces which manifest the clearest relationship to the criteria underlying the taxonomy, they effectively "upgrade" the collections. The impact of this is soon felt in the gallery, as the epitome replaces the oddity at the center of the museum exhibit.

At the same time as the most perfectly representative artifacts are being sought for museum collections, it becomes impossible to maintain one's zest for the aberrant, unclassifiable, wonderful curio. Slowly, then, museums in the last decades of the last century acquired what Baldwin had feared, articles of common use. In part, this was due to the influence of the great international exhibitions of the nineteenth century, beginning with the Crystal Palace extravaganza in 1851, and the example of the South Kensington Museum in London, founded the next year. This movement toward the museumization of ordinary life had crucial significance for visitors. On the one hand, they could easily identify the objects as corresponding in type to ones in personal or family possession, as they could not the meteorites and side-show freaks of the earlier day. But if the exhibits seemed to lead into the foyers of Victorian America, their clear superiority to items in common usage set them apart from everyday experience.[12]

This gap was bridged by a heavy dose of Ruskinian faith that the museum object could be an exemplary inspiration to the manufacturers of the day.[13] In sum, the museum's insistence upon chronological arrangement, and its often zealous advocacy of the march of technology produced a progressive interpretation of history which did not entirely accept the present as its natural result. The consequent discomfort among museum visitors made museums a popular target as

irrelevant treasure-troves, an attitude still evident in common parlance and among magazine cartoonists.

The pedagogical response of the museum--with its long rows of cases resembling the showcases of the department store magnates who so often supplied the money--has been to clarify its taxonomic system. If one really "knows" guns or glass, and can accept the associationist logic by which they are grouped, that is, if one is prepared to replicate the thought-process of the curator, these exhibits are quite valuable. For the great majority of visitors, this experimenting with archaeology inside the walls of urban museums is generally more frustrating.

[Slide of Antiques Exhibit, Keene, N. H. City Hall, Feb. 22, 1878.]

[Slide of Peabody Academy of Science, Salem.]

[Slide of Clock Exhibit, Old Sturbridge Village.]

[Slide of Gun Exhibit, OSV.]

The cabinet of curiosity begat the question--how are these objects to be identified--and the formal exhibit made identification its goal. In turn, the formal exhibit causes one to ponder, how are these objects related? Since the interwar period, museums have struggled to answer this question largely with the interpretive exhibit. It was soon apparent in museums of Indian artifacts, for example, that objects used in ritual observances--musical instruments, totemic images, vestments, and so on--could be grouped together, and organized as an interpretation of ritual itself. Geological and historical time-lines, distribution maps and historical pictures, original written documents detailing historical opinion, advertisements and invoices, photographs of surviving examples in the field, diagrams of machine operations, even sound recordings, motion picture and

slide-sound programs, have all been added to case exhibits to provide interpretive dimensions unavailable through specimens and labels alone.

The contribution of the historian or anthropologist to the planning of such exhibits soon was clear, but the addition of this plethora of supplementary material also called forth, more ominously, the exhibit designer as a key person in determining the educational process of exhibit work. The result is that the role of the curator, and the centrality of the object for which he is advocate, has frequently been reduced in significance. An exhibit of agricultural life, as these slides show, no longer needs the epitome of each tool to tell its story; it is better, in fact, to seek the most typical example as that most likely to convey the simple fact of its presence.

[2 Slides from the Growth of the United States Gallery, National Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution.]

[3 Slides from the Farmer's Year Exhibit, Farmer's Museum, N. Y. State Historical Association, Cooperstown, N. Y.]

In fact, one may do away with objects entirely.

[Slide of Exhibit at the Visitor's Center, Saratoga National Historic Battlefield, National Park Service.]

One of the most interesting accounts of the role of the designer comes from Lothar P. Witteborg of the American Museum of Natural History:

> In exhibition design, where the transmission of concepts and facts is the immediate and explicit purpose, ideas can be communicated by visual symbols, i.e., color and form, which act as substitutes for words and increase their effectiveness as meaning-carriers. It is, therefore, important in conceptual planning that structure,

> space, form, color, and light be dealt with together, not as unrelated elements.
>
> It is the duty of the designer to free us from the fixations of tradition and symbolism usually associated with color and form by emphasizing the direct sensuous perceptional impact of color and form upon the spectator. The exhibition visitor should be made to feel that his trip to the museum was a spatial and visual experience in which the processes of learning came through an unconscious effort on his part.[14]

Note that although the "transmission of concepts and facts" is said to be the "immediate and explicit purpose" of the exhibit, such concepts are to be translated where possible into visual substitutes for words. But while color and form are used as "meaning-carriers," they also are supposed to exert a "direct sensuous perceptional impact" upon the visitor so that his learning takes place unconsciously. The intent obviously is to reduce the exhibit's dependence upon verbal statements to make its point, to integrate it as a visual document. But Witteborg nowhere mentions objects; if there are objects in the exhibit, they are expected to instruct chiefly through their form, color and other visual meanings. The short-circuiting of the verbal phase of object recognition--classification--significance, often suppresses its characteristics entirely amid the coherence of the visual design. Where museums had for a century or more seen the need for more purposeful (and more rational) investigations by visitors, this design theory has been a bold departure.

For the historian, the constraints of the interpretive exhibit may be

considerable. It is quite difficult for form and color to carry the meanings of well-understood historical concepts in any great detail. What often results is that the history presented in interpretive exhibits is oversimplified. Even worse, the past is prettified by this process of stressing the aesthetics even of the homeliest objects. Finally, the objectified relationships between artifacts have been so clearly spelled out that they seem to leave no loose ends for further inquiry. If that is agriculture in all its visual coherence, then the question still remains, of what significance is that to us?

Interpretive exhibits do seek to return objects to the contexts of human interaction from which the formal exhibit extracted them. They are frequently built around questions of how an artifact was made, obtained, used and valued, and a whole interpretive technique--the diorama--has been developed to show this visually within museum walls. But the most direct method for reintroducing this human context is through the adoption of the period space as the surrounding environment. The introduction of historical backgrounds for artifacts was a profound change in the direction of history museums, and has altered the experience of visitors dramatically.

Period spaces include, to be sure, everything from the casual arrangement of three or four compatible pieces of furniture within a museum gallery, to historic house museums, re-creations of entire village communities and reconstructions of major parts of old neighborhoods and cities. Let us look first at the period room as a museum exhibit. These glass-fronted, three-walled galleries, with more or less architectural detail as a backdrop for the antiques on display, are astonishingly common in American museums. Perhaps their popularity was

first prompted by the sensational success of the "New England Kitchen" at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia.

[Slide of the "New England Kitchen."]

But if the Kitchen is now much maligned by scholars for the imprecision of its furnishings, its power to stimulate an American taste for the "colonial" and the "early American" has been remarkable. The adoption of the period room as a museum exhibit in the early twentieth century did not rest with such vague terms. As curatorship has developed, such rooms have generally been organized chronologically around style periods--William and Mary, Queen Anne, Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Sheraton, Duncan Phyfe, Victorian, stressing the names of craftsmen during the heyday of the influence of design books on cabinetmakers, and kings and queens before and after, in periods of greater anonymity or mass production. There have been, it is true, occasional associational rooms in museums --Emerson's study at the Concord Antiquarian Society, for one--but the striking characteristic of period rooms in various museums is their uniformity. Each museum's effort to place the best of its pieces in the right period's room has reduced the interest of all of them.

Though these exhibits are arranged chronologically, they have little to say about any particular historical epoch or about historical change. Each may be understood most clearly as a study of design consistency, the silver matching the furniture, the textiles relating to the pictures on the walls. The scholarship underlying these rooms has sometimes been extraordinary, especially at Winterthur, where categories of regional manufacture and distribution have been added to those of dating.

[Slide of Chinese Parlor, Winterthur Museum.]

But these rooms cannot say much about variations in furniture arrangements; usually of the same size, they are often arranged with corresponding pieces in the same position from room to room. Nor is there any way to discern how many pieces would have been in a room in such a time, or whether any of these might ever have appeared together.

In fact, the key question in furnishing the period room, and in viewing it, is why a particular piece fits in. The most satisfied visitors are those who are challenged by the thorns of identification. Good taste is always an important element; often this results in oddities of furnishing more reflective of modern problems of interior design than of historical practice. And while the period room may well serve as a good reference tool for attributing objects, its historical biases are extremely powerful. It is inherently uninhabitable, for it seems to equate collection with possession, and its owners seem far beyond our power of emulation, much less empathy. Kitchens are always monuments of American ingenuity, in which laborsaving devices play a larger role than labor ever could.

[Slide of Kitchen, John Ward House, Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.]

Its predilection for epitomes makes the class bias of the period room evident; even when the interior of a country house is essayed, the results point to a style of life corroborated by no other evidence.

[Slide of Pine Kitchen, Winterthur.]

The period room contorts style itself into an antique treasure, and we tend to feel diminished by its absence from our own lives more than enriched by its presence

in the past.

Still, such exhibits do generate important historical questions--about use, about the aesthetic perceptivity of earlier generations of Americans, about the relationship of style to social class, about the economics of craftsmanship and levels of taste, about the conspicuousness of this consumption, about the relevance of design motifs to other elements of artistic endeavor--no matter how little these questions have entered into the concerns of those whose tasteful eye and antiquarian skills have organized the gallery.

In a certain sense, the period room also gives us too coherent a view of one space. This probably results from our apperception of it as a gestalt. Not surprisingly, the historic house museum has the same difficulty in convincing us of the situation of that artifact within a larger community. Historic house museums are the most common of American museums, a product, it is clear, of the emergence of the American automobile. There were twenty historic houses preserved in 1895, when there were but four cars; nearly a hundred houses by 1910, when the automobile reached the half-million mark; over 400 houses in 1930 and seven times that number today, as the population of cars has grown from twenty-three to eighty million.[15]

Historic house museums follow the line of museum development from oddity to epitome to statistically typical. The first house saved was the Hasbrouck House, Washington's headquarters in Newburgh, New York, which was purchased by the state in 1850. But the first real jewel of our preserved houses was, of course, Mount Vernon, opened to the public in 1860 after its heroic purchase the year before by Anna Pamela Cunningham and her minions.[16]

[Slide of Mount Vernon.]

In fact, four of the first seven historic houses were saved because Washington slept there; the house museum movement has only recently outlived the burden of that most tired of American jokes, one which indicates the lively American interest in and tension about such associations.

If a Founding Father's residence was not sufficient to immortalize a house, the next criterion was (and remains) age. Chiefly under local initiative, the John Whipple House (1638) in Ipswich, the James Blake House (1648) in Dorchester, and the Fairbanks House (1636) in Dedham were all opened to the public by 1903. Each was understood to be the oldest in these Massachusetts towns. This pattern has been followed in state after state across the country; for a while not long ago, it appeared that the only late nineteenth-century houses which Americans would preserve (aside from our Vanderbilt mansions) would be those of settlers in the Mountain States. More recently, preservation in the East has invaded the nineteenth century, and has broadened its attention to public and industrial buildings, and even open spaces. This has been accomplished in the preservation movement by the intervention of new professionals--architectural historians, architects, and planners--where the old house had been the project largely of local (but also national, as in the case of Mount Vernon) amateurs. In this the model of our exhibit museums has been followed, except that the amateur elite of our house movement has been generally female.

What has replaced the oddity in the museumization of historic houses is the taste for houses of particular architectural merit, regardless of the personages who once lived there. One can date such a change from the establishment of

groups like the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, founded in 1910.

[Slide of Roseland, SPNEA property, Woodstock, Conn.]

With this shift the interest in the taxonomy of historic houses became a serious scholarly concern. For educational reasons, however, even more significant has been the notion of a "cutoff" date, locking the architectural development of a house at (and often in practice restoring it back to) the time of its construction. Nothing is better evidence for the American tendency to stress the discontinuity of our artifact history, and the policy has been savagely attacked in the last decade.[17] But the implication of the cutoff date for interpretation is seen largely in the furnishing plans of such houses; it meant quite simply that the spaces would be furnished as period rooms.

[Slide of Pennsylvania Room, Mount Vernon.]

[Slide of Washington's library, Mount Vernon. The globe, compass and many books are original.]

This had made our historic house museums too well furnished, and alarmingly static. Rooms, if not individual pieces, are labeled, and for each there is clearly a single use. Families ate in dining rooms, sat in sitting rooms, were presumably kept and born in such mythological areas as the keeping and borning rooms. Such a well-ordering of the spaces always suggests that the household was equally well adjusted; children, assigned bedrooms and surrounded by splendid toys, faced a comfortable future, secure in the knowledge that they might one day produce an architectural achievement as impressive as their parents. Women lived apart, in special and delicate spaces, or prepared the elegant repasts that fit the

table settings in the dining room. The house, in short, is a shrine of the American home as the beacon in the cruel wilderness. Free from the mud of the roadway, the darkness of winter evenings, the cold of a severe climate, the noise and odor of strangers to the nuclear family, the contentions of politics or religion, free from work--except domestic work, which is much reduced by "modern conveniences"--it is an expression of a profound fear of the interface between family and world. For the visitor, emerging from his car to meet the costumed hostess who prevails in our house museums, the place is particularly meaningful; the learning that proceeds is often situational--how would one like to live in this house? The family interactions that occur among visitors to our historic houses can be quite remarkable.

But all this may be changing, as the curators of such houses--if they have curators--begin to furnish houses according to probate inventories and to respond to the recent interest among historians in family and women's history, demographic and everyday life studies. And even the historic house as epitome may be changing, although the economics which justify preservation will make that difficult. At Old Sturbridge Village, a computer-assisted survey of vernacular buildings in manufacturing villages will be the basis for selecting the most typical examples for the new mill village to be re-created there.

Which brings us to the next presentative mode, the open-air, or as they are more commonly called in the United States, the outdoor history museums. Products not only of the automobile culture but of its association with the traveling vacation, such museums are among the most ambitious and most popular in the field today. The first outdoor museums, like the European folk museums which

preceded them, were collections of buildings from different periods and regions; they were chosen either for their associational value (the school where Mary's lamb attended, at Henry Ford's Wayside Inn property in Massachusetts) or as places which offered nostalgic commentary on the disappearance of a better age (as with the village post office, town hall, courthouse and gristmill at Ford's Greenfield Village in Michigan).[18]

While it is difficult to conceive of reminiscing in a formal museum's Federal parlor, or even in its Victorian kitchen, the experience of such collections of "anecdotal" buildings are designed to elicit just that. They are weak in their scientific orderings and are not meant to have much instructional value, but they do provide a cozy and warm merger of one's personal memory with that of the prototypical small-town American of the last century. This is quite different from the outdoor "village" museums, which are among the most educationally committed of all American museums.

Such "villages," as responses to the American desire to retain and maintain physical expressions of community, albeit generally far from where most people live, often take on a utopian cast in the visitor's mind. Not surprisingly, utopian ventures of the past make up a large proportion of outdoor museums, for they are small and coherent enough to suggest the possibilities of preservation or re-creation. There are, of course, more Shaker villages across the American landscape than there are Shakers now, but I also have in mind places like Old Salem in North Carolina and Plimoth Plantation. These places hardly offer much consoling memory, for their distance from us is pronounced. At Plimoth, where two and a half centuries of mythologizing could have produced a shrine rather than

a museum, the effort in recent years has been to discard the American eighteenth-century antiques which used to fill the houses and the tastes of visitors, and to represent the site as a real anthropological field.

[Slide of Plimoth Plantation.]

The visitor, I sense, takes on a detached attitude in approaching such alien cultures.

Colonial Williamsburg, as the epitome of the outdoor history museum, sets itself apart from visitors in other ways, chiefly by the explicitly unrepresentative quality of its cultural setting or the men who dominated it. The effort to reconstruct the entire eighteenth-century city, begun under the sponsorship of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in 1928, does offer the visitor powerful impressions of the historical environment. The magnitude of the effort to reproduce this authentically could be overwhelming, were it not for the enormous interpretive effort that accompanies it. Williamsburg is perhaps best seen by walking through its back streets and allowing the careful detail to make itself felt on one's senses, but the overwhelming temptation of the place is toward directing that displaced self into emulations of the Virginia heroes of the Revolution. For a hefty sum, after all, one can sit where Patrick Henry might have sat in the House of Burgesses (at least the movie says so), eat where Washington ate, listen where Jefferson did to lectures on natural and moral philosophy, and converse about the law where George Wythe did.

[3 Slides of Colonial Williamsburg.]

It is one of the consummate consumer experiences in a lifetime, and the most easily available upward mobility in America.

A survey at Williamsburg discovered that visitors are not appreciably more interested in "Everyday Life in Colonial Times" after their visit than before, although that is still their chief interest. What does increase, markedly, though, is the visitor's interest in "Early Patriots" and "Early System of Government."[19] One does not play the role of an everyday citizen, it is clear, and it is hard to empathize with the artisan or slave who formed the preponderance of the population. These characters are approached from the status of a client in the shops and houses.

Nor is Williamsburg experienced very profoundly as a community; its urban setting and the unclear demarcations of the historical area, together with the lack of technological consistency (e.g., the paving of the streets) and the extreme proximity of the resort functions of the town, contribute to this. But also important is that the local quality of that particular Virginia city, like the everyday life of its lesser citizens, is almost neglected in the attention focused on the Revolution. It is not a museum, therefore, of how life experiences were confronted in the eighteenth century, for Williamsburg was not home to the people whom we emulate there. But even there, the resources of the Foundation are prepared to respond, and with the opening of Carter's Grove Plantation and its working agricultural interpretation, such deficiencies may be partly remedied.

If Williamsburg is the epitome of the outdoor history museum, seeking to perfect its details within the limits of a particular place and time, there is also a type of outdoor museum that is as much open-ended as it is in the open air. Village museums like Sturbridge, the Village Crossroads at Cooperstown, Mystic Seaport, Old Bethpage Village and Upper Canada Village--none of them

actual sites of villages--are each supposed to represent a large number of other places which are now altered by the process of social and physical change. Each of these museums is a sample of typicalities as well; within each there can be only a few houses and perhaps only one of each type of craft. One would like to say that these criteria have been based on some careful research, but the vagaries of collecting generally make that impossible.

In fact, most such museums begin as regional collections without a specific time focus, and only as the need to define collections and develop interpretations becomes evident do fixed periods get established. They can therefore be wondrously misleading, for they are always catching up on earlier mistakes as much as planning for the future. They often start and are still perceived as "colonial" or "pioneer" villages, but they rarely have enough authentic material to furnish all the shops and houses and public buildings with such early examples. All of these I have mentioned, therefore, are now chiefly interested in the early nineteenth century, much to their own surprise, and the need to find out what happened after American Independence is an unexpected burden.

Increasingly, then, the research which underlies museum planning takes two forms. On the one hand, there is the older form of careful searching for precise enough information to permit the careful furnishing of a new general store--identifying the thousands of items of store stock well enough to have copies made. On the other hand, the research must demonstrate the reliability of that piece of evidence as a sample of store stock in order to permit the store to represent the thousands of others which later succumbed to the onslaught of Sears Roebuck. This latter kind of study may even redirect the whole attention

of the museum, as the discovery of the statistical frequency of mill villages in rural towns did at Sturbridge in the mid-1960's. Fairness to the historical record then dictated the need to show early industrial growth, and led to the planning of an entire second village on that theme.

Though the research examples I have cited have been directed at the more typical representation of buildings and furnishings, such efforts are always somewhat stymied by the fact that the collection as survival skews the available sample of objects. Unless one is prepared to dispense with the exhibit of original artifacts, as Plimoth has or as the Asa Knight Store at Sturbridge will, the collections serve to thrust the museum into the role of an exemplar of the best things in the best taste. But the demonstration of historical work processes, on the other hand, is more susceptible to the test of typicality, especially where the work requires the reproduction of period tools in order to save the collection from destruction.

Despite the zeal for applying quasi-statistical authenticity to such museum collections, this has almost no discernible impact upon the museum visitor. Except for those who are themselves collectors or restorers of their own houses, the visitor cares little about the taxonomic basis of the interpretation offered. Caught up in the sense of an historical community, he does not care to test this particular community against others; he wants to know that it is really "real." Which means that he accepts the museum community's disjunction from its world, just as it is disjointed from the tourist world beyond the entrance gate. No matter how hard such museums try, then, either to interpret their villages as representative

of, or in historical connection to, other communities, they are perceived as self-contained units. The isolated self-sufficient community which many visitors read in these museums is a product not of their weakness of interpretation but of the visitor's perceptual process. The misconception is, furthermore, compounded by the internal typicalities of such museums, in which one blacksmith shop is presumed to serve all of these inhabitants. Such harmonic interactions among exhibit buildings and demonstrations seem to suggest an air of social harmony as well; even without the inevitable comparisons to New York City, the village is a peaceable kingdom indeed.

There is something fearfully ironic in this, for all the effort to afford the visitor opportunities to contextualize the objects of the past results in his inability to see context, to deal with community as a concept. Instead, the individual pieces are too absorbing, and it is disconcerting to be expected to make the linkages which the staff has prepared for you. What role is the visitor to play, then?

Perhaps because he is a tourist first, and often does not think of these places as museums, the visitor is most comfortable in the role of consumer. At the most static and decorous of our residences, this attitude takes the form of pricing the merchandise, or of inflating its "pricelessness."

[Slide of Parlor, Salem Towne House, OSV.]

By contrast, when viewing the work environment of the full-scale Pliny Freeman Farm at Sturbridge, the visitor never asks what the implements are worth in 1973 dollars.

[Slide of Freeman Farm, OSV.]

It is work itself which has to be priced, and the result is a conviction that people who had to work this way led lives of bare subsistence. Even when the Farmhouse appears to the professional staff to be overfurnished, it is still perceived as economically primitive. In the same way, the economic nexus and the technological contexts which underpin an interpretive demonstration are lost, and process is perceived to be more primitive than it is.

[Slide of Hervey Brooks Pottery, OSV.]

But the visitor is prepared to play a more engaging role than that of twentieth-century consumer. Invariably the tendency of the museum to depict ever more ordinary aspects of life produces an empathetic, self-dramatizing reaction. The cooper shop is alien, but the pottery is potentially a hobby, and the identification with housekeeping activities like laundering and cooking may be even more powerful. At a certain point, the tension between one's detachment from the nineteenth century and one's fascination with the quotidian can become bewildering. The visitor wants to be engaged in the theater he sees before him, but the drama is too foreign for him to understand the role.

Does this suggest that outdoor history museums have to sacrifice the taxonomy of typicality as the basis of interpretation, and structure their teaching on the lines of the visitors' own situational learning patterns? If we consider the difficulties of understanding the relationship between families and the community institutions around them--schools, churches, lodges, taverns, stores--which result from the visitor's distaste for context, is it possible to have visitors learn about these relationships in an experiential way? Instead, therefore, of classifying the diverse institutions which provided education and

training to a child in the nineteenth century, could we teach by asking the visitor to solve the problem of attaining adult skills and adult roles through the available channels of the museum village?

We are just beginning to experiment with such simulations, primarily with school and college groups.

[Slides of studios and Skidmore field study, OSV.]

What we are discovering is that the museum may be thought of as a collection of experiences--making a living, living together as a family, deciding how to spend town funds. It then becomes possible to engage visitors in these experiences, building on their willingness to displace themselves personally in the historical environment. The simulation becomes an experiential way of learning about the contexts of human behavior far more successful than a forced attention to the taxonomy of the community arrangement. The museum visitor is asked to think about how a person interacted with this environment, but his answer comes through interacting with the environment.

There is a danger in this, of course, especially for those of us who question the reliability of any account of a typical human experience. But it should be recognized that the dramatic and the statistical are the two poles of our mental life as privatized people in a mass society. The museum may become a place for us to experiment with the intersection of our private perceptions with the social world. Does it remain a museum in that case? If the visitor "lives in" this alien world of the outdoor museum, does the world he lives in at "home" become "museumized" as well? Ultimately the context left for such alternative communities is that of everyday life in the modern world.

This is quite far from the intention of the cabinet of curiosities. Where once the visitor wondered at the museum, now it wonders back. In seeking for accuracy and authenticity in its interpretation, the museum came to rely upon more and more arcane kinds of scholarship--in the end to find its authenticity in the minds of its visitors. It continues to generate historical questions and new approaches to their answers, but ultimately it finds its enterprise only tangential to the concerns of historians. It strives to offer scientific classifications and arrives at the point of being a work of art. It is built with old things and old ideas, and it comes, at the end, to emphasize, in Updike's words, the "never-before-discovered."[20]

FOOTNOTES

1. American Association of Museums, America's Museums: The Belmont Report (Washington, 1969), p. v; James J. Heslin, "Does the Museum of History Teach History?" in Museums and Education, ed. by Eric Larrabee (Washington, 1968), p. 153.

2. John Updike, "Museums and Women," in Museums and Women and Other Stories (New York, 1972), p. 12.

3. James Joyce, Finnegans Wake (New York, 1959), p. 8.

4. Calvin Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1970), p. 17.

5. The key bibliographical reference for the field is Frederick L. Rath, Jr., and Merrilyn Rogers O'Connell, Guide to Historic Preservation, Historical Agencies, and Museum Practices: A Selective Bibliography (Cooperstown, N. Y., 1970), especially pp. 247-276. The best general history of museums is Alma S. Wittlin, Museums: In Search of a Usable Future (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); see especially the notes on pp. 276-277 and 281-286.

6. Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., et al., A Cabinet of Curiosities: Five Episodes in the Evolution of American Museums (Charlottesville, Va., 1967); Leslie Whittaker Dunlap, American Historical Societies 1790-1860 (Madison, 1944); Walter Muir Whitehill, Independent Historical Societies: An enquiry into their research and publication functions and their financial future (Boston, 1962).

7. Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., "The Cabinet of the American Philosophical Society," in A Cabinet of Curiosities, pp. 9-10.

8. Clifford K. Shipton, "The Museum of the American Antiquarian Society," in A Cabinet of Curiosities, pp. 40-41.

9. Broadside in New York Public Library.

10. Louis Leonard Tucker, "'Ohio Show-Shop': The Western Museum of Cincinnati, 1820-1867," in A Cabinet of Curiosities, pp. 90-95.

11. Shipton in A Cabinet of Curiosities, p. 42.

12. Wittlin, pp. 131-134.

13. Tomkins, p. 27.

14. Lothar P. Witteborg, "Design Standards in Museum Exhibits," Curator, I, No. 1 (1958), 38.

15. Laurence Vail Coleman, Historic House Museums (Washington, 1933), p. 18.

16. Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg (New York, 1965), pp. 41-62 et passim.

17. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Dissent at Colonial Williamsburg," New York Times, September 22, 1963; David Lowenthal, "The American Way of History," Columbia University Forum, IX, No. 3 (Summer 1966), 27-32; George L. Wrenn, III, "What is a Historic House Museum?" Historic Preservation, XXIII, No. 1 (January-March 1971), 55-58.

18. Roger Butterfield, "Henry Ford, the Wayside Inn, and the Problem of 'History is Bunk,'" Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, LXXVII (1965), 53-66; Coleman, p. 17.

19. Edward P. Alexander, The Interpretation Program of Colonial Williamsburg (Williamsburg, 1971), p. 14. A revealing booklet.

20. Reuel Denney, "The Discovery of the Popular Culture," in Robert E. Spiller and Eric Larrabee, eds., American Perspectives: The National Self-Image in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), pp. 154-177; Henri Lefebvre, Everyday Life in the Modern World, trans., Sacha Rabinovitch (New York, 1971); Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (New York, 1970), especially pp. 346-347.